



*From “Wetland Program Development Grants (WPDGs) Case Studies”  
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**Fremont County Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD):** *Engaging landowners in the Wetland Reserve Program and increasing participation in wetland restoration in Iowa*

**Introduction**

Alternatives to the agricultural use of flood plains are steadily increasing in Iowa as state and federal agencies work to engage more landowners and farmers in resource management. Wetland restoration, including the conversion of farm land back to wetland areas, has been a specific area of interest over the past several years. Public initiatives such as the Wetlands Reserve Program, efforts of private conservation organizations, and economic losses suffered from continued flooding have provided the motivation and means to consider and implement such changes in flood plain land use management.

The Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP), administered by the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), has been particularly effective at increasing landowner participation in wetland restoration. This voluntary program provides technical and financial assistance for landowners willing to restore, enhance, and protect eligible lands. Restoration options include permanent easements, 30-year easements, or restoration cost-share agreements. Conservation Districts, including the Fremont County Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) of Iowa, support the efforts of NRCS by:

- Identifying priority areas within their district;
- Providing input to the State Technical Committee;
- Assisting with the development of cost-share rates;
- Assisting with the development and implementation of conservation planning; and
- Assisting with local outreach and educational efforts.

Fremont County used the WPDG program to address some the above responsibilities.

**WPDG Activity**

WPDGs supported the Two Rivers Wetland Project, an effort to increase farmer enrollment in the Wetland Reserve Program and other agency floodplain programs. Fremont County was largely affected by extreme flooding in the 1980's and 1990s. The Two Rivers Wetland Project helped ease some of the landowners' financial burdens, while directing attention to and increasing enthusiasm for wetland restoration activities.

This project consisted of two key elements: Coordination of public and private partnerships and establishing an outreach program to increase wetland restoration efforts.

1. **Coordinating public and private partnerships:** Fremont County increased coordination between wetland restoration programs and public and private entities such as U.S. Department of Agriculture, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, U.S. Fish

and Wildlife Services, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Iowa Department of Natural Resources, Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship, drainage districts along the Missouri River, landowners, Ducks Unlimited and Iowa State University. As landowners of sites with high restoration potential were identified, projects were reviewed by advisory groups consisting of the above entities. Fremont County and partners reviewed specific landowner interests, estimated restoration costs and identified funding criteria for multiple organizations. Following this initial review, a restoration plan with financial incentives and long term management objectives was developed to satisfy landowner needs, while restoring the maximum number of wetland acres.

2. **Establishing an outreach program:** Fremont County focused on increasing wetland benefits and landowner incentives for restoration. They created brochures, newsletters and news articles to increase public awareness; developed an Outdoor Learning Center; and hosted informative meetings where landowners and the general public could learn more about relevant programs.

Once interested land owners were identified and restoration potential was assessed, specific funding opportunities were identified and Fremont County developed innovative approaches for public involvement in projects. By the end of 2005, the Two Rivers Wetland Project helped to enroll over 10,000 acres of marginal agricultural land into wetland restoration programs along the Missouri and Nishnabotna Rivers. These activities provided an outlet for landowners and producers on these marginal farms. Producers were excited to see these wet farmlands can be converted or restored into fully functioning wetlands. The restoration work also sparked greater interest in local wildlife and native plant identification by landowners and other members of the community.

### **Current Work and Future Plans**

The Fremont County Soil and Water Conservation District is currently conducting landscape scale assessments to prioritize restoration efforts. They are also working to develop training modules to help landowners manage their conservation lands. Some Fremont SWCD outreach programs include: providing annual wetland tours for landowners and local high school students; hosting an annual Earth Day event with local students helping with prairie restoration activities; hosting an annual Arbor Day tree planting demonstration to educate the public on the benefits of planting trees; and organizing a Missouri River Cleanup that encourages volunteers to clean up the banks of the river. Fremont County will continue to take a proactive role in the protection of its wetland resources.

Please visit the Fremont County Soil and Water Conservation District website (<http://www.fremontswcd.org/index.html>) for more information on the Two Rivers Project and Wetlands Reserve Program.

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